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RNC brought challenges, and we should talk about them

By Chris Coleman

Article Last Updated: 09/20/2008 04:49:26 PM CDT

It's been a challenging and at times difficult couple of weeks in our hometown.

After two years of planning, the Republican National Convention came to St. Paul. Thanks to the hard work of so many people, St. Paul shone in the national spotlight. Rice Park sparkled with fountains and flowers, but also with the hundreds of people who brought personality and pageantry to our midst.

Delegates and media types went out of their way to compliment our hospitality. People who were here or saw us on TV will bring their convention business back to the RiverCentre. Others will give St. Paul a second look when locating a business, sending a child to college or deciding where to spend their retirement. That is all very good news.

There were, however, some significant challenges, and we should talk about them. It was hard for all of us to see pictures of downtown St. Paul with officers dressed in full riot gear. It was hard to navigate security fences, to see video of tear gas or smoke bombs or people in flex-cuffs, to hear accounts of people innocently caught up in an altercation and arrested. And it is hard to maintain perspective on the fact that, for most of the time in most of the city during those four days, people were having a wonderful time and the police presence was, as we had planned, in the background blending into the

hospitality that people from all over the country came to appreciate.

St. Paul's police department and its officers are deeply respected by the residents of this city and they deserve to be. Nothing about what happened two weeks ago should change that. They accepted responsibility for the most complex facet of this event. They did so knowing that national political conventions, like other such meetings, serve as lightning rods for intense protests organized by people whose stated goal is to prevent the meetings from happening. During a 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization, for example, Seattle was surprised by the tactics of those who were able to shut down whole portions of the city, keeping delegates in their hotels and putting law enforcement on the defensive. That put cities around the world on notice.

We were confident that with smart planning and strong relationships with those who wanted to host a major protest rally, we could avoid the problems faced by other cities. For two years, however, our planning centered on a decision to deploy the minimum amount of force necessary to ensure public safety.

Instead of greeting visitors with police dressed in full riot gear, as Denver did a week earlier, we employed officers in ordinary police uniforms, riding bicycles and on horseback and directed them to remain in small groups so their presence would be less prominent. We established simple and respectful protocols to accommodate those who wanted to engage in civil disobedience and be arrested. And we said to anyone who would listen that all who wanted to raise a peaceful voice in protest would be welcome in St. Paul.

We hoped this strategy would suffice and the police presence would be friendly and minimally visible.

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Ten thousand people gathered on Sept. 1 for a massive, peaceful and well planned rally that wound its way to within a block of the Xcel Energy Center, closer to the convention than any other city has been willing to permit. Thousands gathered on Harriet Island for a Labor Day concert and had a wonderful time. Hundreds of people sat on the grass in front of the True Blue Minnesota JumboTron. All this happened under the careful, but quiet, watch of police officers intent on protecting the rights and safety of all who gathered to make their voices heard.

On Monday, however, we were confronted with 200 to 300 rioters intent on disrupting the convention and, in the process, putting at risk the public's safety. I don't know if I can adequately describe the feeling I had as I watched a dumpster lit on fire and pushed down a steep hill into a police car or a young man walk up and smash the Macy's window. There was a moment when I feared that we would lose our city to chaos and was, therefore, fully supportive when our law enforcement leadership didn't hesitate to order our officers to put on their protective gear and restore the peace.

As they do every day, they did what we asked, and, despite being spit on, taunted, kicked and otherwise provoked, they were able to bring things under control within a relatively short period of time and within the restrictions of the law.

As I drove home late Monday night, I was disappointed for all those who had worked so hard and were so confident that St. Paul could break the mold. They believed — we all believed — that if we treated everyone with respect, whatever their point of view, they would, in turn, respect the people and places of our city.

There are certainly lessons to be learned from this experience. I look forward to the opportunity to talk

with journalists, for instance, about our mutual expectations now that their ranks have grown to include bloggers and independent videographers. Have the formal and informal "rules" under which both the media and police operated for so long changed? While the city attorney doesn't intend to charge journalists who were caught unaware in mass arrests, the more complicated questions relate to those instances where folks may have been engaged in both covering the news and committing civil disobedience. That's an important conversation for us to have.

I look forward to the findings from former U.S. Attorney Thomas Heffelfinger and former Assistant U.S. Attorney Andy Luger who, at my request, are conducting an independent review of our RNC public safety planning and implementation. As proud as I am of our law enforcement personnel, I know that none of us is perfect. We will stay with this process until we have sorted out all the issues and addressed all your questions.

I am eternally grateful that no one was seriously injured. And I am exceedingly proud that we live in a community where we can talk respectfully about what happened, learning both from our success and from those things that didn't go so well.

That, in a sense, brings us back to where we began two years ago. We embarked on this journey with two goals. One was to introduce the city we love to the world. By every measure, we exceeded even our own expectations.

Our other goal was to demonstrate the enduring power of the First Amendment. We set out to show that, more than two centuries after the Bill of Rights was ratified, people with vastly different opinions on fundamental issues could respectfully share the same stage.

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As I watched my own family rally peacefully against the war within sight and sound of the Republican Convention, my faith in our country was renewed. There are few places in the world where dissenting voices are not only allowed but encouraged. And I wonder if the threat of violence doesn't discourage many American cities from even extending the invitation to host a national convention. What we did was hard. Maybe we didn't get everything quite right, and we will sort all that out. But let's not ever lose sight of the fact that St. Paul stood up for the power and principles of our democracy.

Chris Coleman is the mayor of St. Paul.

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